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Guildford Rural District Council.

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SPECIAL REPORT

OF THE

MEDICAL OFFICER OF HEALTH

ON THE

HOUSING OF THE WORKING CLASSES

Guildford:

BIDDLE AND SHIPPAM, PRINTERS, HAYDON PLACE.

GUILDFORD RURAL DISTRICT COUNCIL.

Special Report of the Medical Officer of Health on the Housing of the Working Classes.

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I beg to present a Special Report on the Housing of the Working Classes in the District.

The Report is based upon nine years' official experience in the district, and also upon a recent general inspection of the various parishes made with the special object of ascertaining whether the supply of cottages was sufficient in number and satisfactory in quality. The reason for this inspection was the recent coming into force of the Housing and Town Planning Act, which confers the duty and the necessary powers upon Rural District Councils of providing, if necessary, further housing accommodation for the working classes in their districts. The Act also gives power, subject to the consent of the Local Government Board, for the compulsory acquisition of land; and it is provided that in determining the amount of any disputed compensation no additional allowance shall be made on account of the purchase being compulsory.

A further important provision of the Act is the power conferred on the Local Government Board and County Councils of enforcing the execution of the Housing Acts on complaint by the Parish Council, Parish Meeting, or four inhabitant householders of the district that the District Council has been in default; and, moreover, the County Council, even in the absence of such complaint, may, if for any reason they consider it expedient, apply to the Local Government Board for an order conferring upon them powers of a local authority under Part 3 of the Act, which deals with the erection of dwellings for the working classes.

In presenting a somewhat unfavourable report on the housing conditions it should not be inferred that they are worse than in other districts in Surrey. I have reason to believe that they are better than in many districts, thanks to the support given by the Council to the recommendations of its officers; still, the conditions are such as in my opinion demand the careful consideration of the Council, not only in respect of the amelioration of the sanitary condition of the existing dwellings, but also in respect of the provision of new cottages. In estimating the need for additional cottages it must be borne in mind that no system exists for the registration of the wants of the various localities, and that in order to gauge the total requirements a very extensive investigation would have to be undertaken.

Dealing first with the existing dwellings, I may mention that the Local Government Board are about to issue regulations under Section 17 of the Act as to the manner of inspection of the district and as to the keeping of records of the details of these inspections. The result will be that the Council will have on its books records of the insanitary state of many dwellings which it will be

impracticable to remedy at a reasonable expense. The closing of the dwellings may follow, and this will accentuate the great dearth of cottages which I hope to prove exists in the district. Chief among the insanitary conditions of old dwellings, in my opinion, is the presence of excessive dampness of the floors and walls, and I should not hesitate to condemn as unfit for habitation any dwelling exhibiting this feature to any degree. It is significant that this defect is the chief subject of complaint by the cottagers themselves, and I believe they are right in considering it as more important than any other.

There are of course a large number of old cottages in the district which have been and can be repaired, but a considerable number have reached the stage when they are not worth further expense. It is partly because of the probability that these old cottages will be closed and not replaced by new ones that I feel that the accommodation which is already insufficient for our increasing population will be further diminished, and that the matter calls for the interference of the Council. I may here quote from a letter written by a gentleman having an intimate knowledge of one parish: "The condition of the cottages is deplorable; nothing is ever done, and when they are condemned no fresh ones are ever built. Cottages are not to be obtained. There is *urgent need of more cottages for the people to live in.* There are often cases of the greatest hardship through the insufficiency of cottages, and great worry and anxiety is often caused to the people by the difficulty of getting a house." I may at once say that my own experience and investigations in the various parishes confirm to a greater or less degree the opinion expressed in this letter. Another gentleman who in his official capacity has special means of knowing the local conditions, writes me to the effect that there is to his knowledge an absolute want of cottage

accommodation in all the parishes of the Guildford Rural District.

Before deciding that a local authority have failed to exercise their powers of building cottages, and presumably before consenting to the adoption of a scheme, the Local Government Board must take into consideration (1) the necessity for further accommodation for the housing of the working classes in such district; (2) the probability that the required accommodation will not be otherwise provided and the other circumstances of the case; and (3) whether having regard to the liability which will be incurred by the rates, it is prudent for the local authority to undertake the provision of such accommodation. I will deal with the matter under these headings.

With reference to the necessity for further accommodation, a remarkable proof of this necessity is afforded by the fact that at the times of my inspections I failed to find or to hear of more than one habitable cottage which was empty and available throughout the whole of the district, and even for this there were applications within a week. It is inconceivable that the balance between supply and demand should be so finely adjusted as this in the district, and the only reasonable conclusion, which is confirmed with striking uniformity in all the parishes, by the enquiries that I have made is that in all probability the supply is less than the demand. A further proof is afforded by the fact that when a cottage happens to be empty there are invariably several applicants for it. Even on enquiring from those who from interested and other motives reply that further cottages are not required I always obtained the additional information that if a few cottages were built they would quickly be taken up.

For the efficient carrying out of the Housing Acts in respect of unhealthy dwellings it appears to me that a

small margin of empty cottages is necessary—even if only one or two in each parish. There would thus be somewhere for tenants to move into if it should be necessary to close the house, and it would be useful in those cases where the repairs necessary are so extensive as to require the house being empty before they can be properly carried out, or when the tenants have to leave for any other reason. In one parish recently a cottage owner has had to build a pair of cottages for the temporary housing of families living in old and dilapidated dwellings whilst the old ones are being repaired. The loss consequent on this small margin of empty cottages need not always fall on the private owner, for although the Council would not enter on any scheme which was not calculated to yield a return for the expenditure involved, they would no doubt take their chance like the private owner of any occasional slight loss from an empty cottage.

A comparison of the census figures of 1901 with those of 1891 shows that so far from there being a normal increase there was an actual decrease of population in eight parishes in the district, viz., Albury (97), East Horsley (74), West Clandon (68), Artington (62), Ockham (36), Wisley (31), East Clandon (29), and Wanborough (8), whereas the population of the Guildford Union increased nearly 22 per cent. Even in the case of the other parishes with two exceptions, viz., Ripley and West Horsley, there had been considerable emigration, as shown by the fact that the increase in population had not nearly equalled the "natural increase," *i.e*, the excess of births over deaths. There was thus a general exodus to the towns or other districts, and it is more than probable that the scarcity of cottages for young people as they grow up and desire to get married is at least partly answerable for this regrettable diminution of the population. The argument that there is no

work in the parishes to keep the young men there, is, as far as my observations go, not a sound one and would in any case not account for the great reduction which has taken place in some parishes. It is to be feared that it is rather due to the reluctance of landowners to provide new cottages. The Rural District is thinly populated as there are on an average three acres to every inhabitant, so that there is plenty of room for increase of population and houses without the district losing its rural character.

In my Annual Report for 1904 I pointed out the decided scarcity of cottages in the more rural areas, and the difficulty of getting cases of overcrowding remedied owing to this scarcity. The majority of the cottages in the district have only two bedrooms, which fact in itself proves that overcrowding and improper mixing of the sexes must necessarily occur in many cases. During the last five years at least 30 cases have been dealt with by the Sanitary Inspector.

The same difficulty arises when cottages are found to be unfit for habitation. If reported as unfit under the Act the possibility has always to be faced that the owner will not consider the property worth putting into repair, with the result that the unfortunate tenants may have to turn out and find it impossible to secure another cottage in the same locality. On this account one has often to consent to an unsatisfactory patching up of cottages, which tends to bring about a lower standard of house sanitation in the district. It should be borne in mind that our rapidly advancing ideas of sanitation condemn conditions which were formerly ignored, and probably before many years are past a standard will be demanded which many of our cottages will fail to reach.

In recommending the Council to consider the necessity of themselves erecting cottages in the district, I must at

once disabuse the minds of those to whom the mention of a housing scheme suggests the erection of monotonous rows of ugly cottages and the urbanisation of our pretty villages. Nothing is further from my mind in bringing forward this report. On the contrary I feel confident that the Council could erect cottages here and there, in pairs or blocks of four, which would not detract from the picturesqueness of our villages, and which by serving as models, both as to planning and construction, as well as in the matter of sanitary arrangement, would tend to prevent the erection of the hideous cottages, which in some parts disfigure the countryside. The method of procedure would, of course, remain to be subsequently determined by the Council, but all I would suggest is that the Council should acquire by agreement, if possible, one or two acres in various parts and erect thereon cottages in pairs, or for the sake of cheapness, in blocks of four and not more than eight to the acre. They should contain a large living room, a scullery, and either two or three bedrooms.

The objection may be raised that the erection of cottages in any one parish would only serve to draw people from towns or other districts. From the point of view of the national health this would be a very desirable result, and it would in any event increase the rateable value of the district; but I hasten to add that my investigations have only had reference to the adequacy of housing accommodation for the workers in their own parishes. The opinion sometimes expressed that new cottages would draw people into the rural parishes in search of work seems very far-fetched. In any case the Council could refuse to let to any who were not working in the locality.

Difficulties may arise in the case of parishes contiguous to towns, which are partly populated by town workers, as is the case notably in Merrow. This is more or less

counterbalanced by the fact that a considerable number of workers in the rural district have to reside in towns. Whether there is a preponderance in one direction or not, the fact remains that the cottages in the suburban parishes are very scarce; and although they may be sufficient for the residents in these parishes, the influx of town workers, which has also considerably raised the rents, cannot be prevented; so that the situation as it exists has to be faced.

The chief obstacle to the erection of cottages in most of the parishes is no doubt the difficulty of obtaining land. In some parishes no land is for sale for any class of building, in others it is only available for large houses. The erection of these large houses even creates a further demand for cottages, as in many cases they employ men who have to live at a distance.

It is within the Council's power now to overcome the land difficulty by compulsory acquisition, and they may, if they think fit, lease it out to others for the purpose of building workmen's dwellings. This, however, in my opinion, would not be a desirable course as the Council would thereby lose control over the planning of the cottages, and, moreover, they should be able to build cottages so as to let them at a lower rental than private individuals, owing to the fact that the new Act enables the Council to borrow at a lower rate of interest and extends the period of repayment to a maximum of eighty years.

The question of building bye-laws has had little or nothing to do with the lack of building, as in fourteen out of the seventeen parishes in the district there are none in force. Of the three parishes in which there is a series in force a fair amount of cottage building has taken place in two, and, moreover, the substitution of the rural for the urban code in two of the parishes does not seem to have

affected the rate of building, and no advantage has yet been taken of the absence of requirements respecting the structure of walls to build cottages of anything but solid brick or stone according to previous custom. On the other hand what has to some extent stimulated and determined the situation of such cottages as have been erected has been the extension of water mains in various parts of the district.

Dealing next with the question of the probability that the required accommodation will not be otherwise provided, I have come to the conclusion that private enterprise is not likely to supply the need, partly owing to the difficulty of obtaining land and partly because in those parishes where land is available owners are unable to put up cottages to let at rents within the reach of rural labourers. There are, of course, differences of opinion as to the advisability of Councils competing with private enterprise in this matter, but the question of expediency has been settled by the action of the legislature in placing upon local authorities the duty of seeing that the working classes are provided with proper accommodation. It is true that private enterprise has and may yet to some extent relieve the situation by building cottages to let at rentals above the average means of the labouring classes of the locality, as those with means above the average move into them and so make room for those less fortunate. The Council, however, could do more in this way and could build to let at a rental more closely approaching the average means of the worker, which may be taken to be from 15/- to 18/- a week. With rare exceptions private enterprise has failed to provide in this district cottages which let at less than 6/- per week.

Dealing finally with the liability which would be incurred by the rates, it is not suggested that any scheme

should be launched which was not calculated to be self-supporting, but any loss sustained would be chargeable over the whole district, unless otherwise decided, on application to the Local Government Board. The question of cost would of course have to be subsequently gone into, but my own enquiries have led me to believe that good cottages in blocks of four could be built in most parts of the district at a cost of about £160 a cottage, exclusive of the cost of the land. Two pairs of excellent cottages have recently been built near Peaslake on high-lying ground (which would increase the cost of haulage), and the builder who erected them is satisfied with an inclusive rental of 4s. 6d. a week, although he had to pay £100 for the half acre of land. Needless to add that he had between thirty and forty applicants for the cottages, even in such an outlying and rural locality. In other instances where cheap cottages have been built, I have, as in the case just mentioned, found that the builder is a working man himself, and it may be that this is the only way of getting cheap cottages built, at any rate on a small scale.

There is another kind of housing question which I cannot well omit from this report, although the remedy required may be different. I refer to the very unsatisfactory housing of the more or less casual agricultural labourer. It is only occcasionally that any provision is made for them, and they have to find the best shelter they can in sheds or beneath hedges in the field. Some of these farm workers can hardly be described as casual, for in one shed, without flooring and without light or means of ventilation or any conveniences whatever, I found a man and woman who had been working on the farm for the greater part of the last two years; and not far off another couple who had since last November lived in a rude shelter in a ditch, whereas in the immediate vicinity a large and

substantial building had been erected for the occasional shelter of cattle on the farm. Similar instances have also come to the knowledge of the Sanitary Inspector in the parishes of East Clandon, Merrow, Godalming Rural, Send, and Albury. Any sudden interference on our part only deprives the people of work and some kind of shelter, and the only remedy seems to be the permanent provision, by the landowners or farmers, of cottages or sanitary shelters. These people are not usually of the gipsy class, and some of them at least have at one time or other lived in cottages.

I now proceed to give short descriptions of the conditions found in the various parishes; but to avoid repetition, I may say that my investigations disclosed in practically all the parishes, both a lack of cottages and the existence of many cottages which are old and more or less insanitary. My information was gained from inspection and from enquiries of representative people in the parishes. Where instances are given they should be taken as merely a selection from a large number of others.

GODALMING RURAL.—A considerable number of cottages have been built in this parish, but except for a few in connection with large houses, the majority have been on the outskirts of Godalming. Several pairs of superior cottages have been erected at Hurtmore, which have let readily at 7s. weekly. I could hear of no land available for building, except for large houses. There appears to be in the south-east portion of the parish a smaller proportion of cottages than usual, and many workers have to live in Godalming. In the north-western portion of the parish I heard of men who had to walk nearly two miles to their work daily for want of a cottage. Rents vary from 3s. upwards. A large number of cottages have no sinks; a block of four at Eashing have no back entrances, and two

of these have no external light or ventilation for the scullery, nor does it seem possible to provide any.

COMPTON.—Only one pair of cottages, and that at the Binscombe end of the parish, have been built during the last five years. Several men working at a large builder's between Compton and Puttenham have to live either at Godalming, Aldershot or Woking, which are from three to six miles distant. Rents are from 3s. to 5s.

PUTTENHAM.—Eight cottages have been built in this parish during the last five years, but there is still a great scarcity. The local landowner has recently gone to great expense in renovating the cottages in the village and building a few new ones. Rents of old cottages are from 3s. 6d. to 4s. 6d.

WANBORO'.—Six cottages have been pulled down during the last few years, and only two of these are now being replaced. Rents are from 3s. to 3s. 6d., but most of the cottages go with the farms. The number of these is, however, insufficient, as I heard of one man who had to walk four miles daily to work, two others live in Puttenham, and a man and wife live in a shed on the farm.

RIPLEY.—Twelve new cottages have been built in the village during the last few years, but there is still a great scarcity. Many of the existing cottages are old and dilapidated, and will before long have to be "condemned." The old cottages let at from 3s. 9d. upwards and the new ones from 6s. to 7s. I am given to understand that the difficulty here is the obtaining of land.

SEND.—A fair amount of cottage building has taken place here in recent years owing to land being available, and it is probable that there are sufficient cottages for the needs of this end of the parish. A certain proportion of

the inhabitants work in Old Woking. A gentleman resident in the locality, some years ago owing to the rents charged being, in his opinion, high in proportion to the current wages, built sixteen cottages, which he lets at 5s. 3d. a week inclusive.

WORPLESDON.—In spite of several pairs of cottages having been built in this large parish during recent years the demand has not been satisfied. The great majority of the employees at a large engineering works live in Guildford. At least two labourers with large families were recently turned out of cottages rented at 6s. 6d. a week, and had nowhere to go to. One of them who worked for the Council was admitted to the Union Workhouse, and the other man, his wife and seven children, were temporarily housed in one room of another cottage. In another instance the Inspector found a family of three occupying an outbuilding, with filthy surroundings, on a small farm.

PIRBRIGHT.—Fourteen pairs of cottages, letting at 6s. and 6s. 6d., have been built during the last five years, the majority being in the part contiguous to Woking, which partly accounts for the demand which still exists.

ARTINGTON.—This parish, like Wanborough, is thinly populated, and consists mainly of large farms and the hamlet of Littleton. Only two cottages have been built during the last five years.

MERROW.—Two streets are of an urban character, and are to a considerable extent inhabited by Guildford workers. Average rents here are about 6s. to 7s. A few cottages built here and near the church have rents of from 7s. 6d. to 10s. The cottages in the old part of the village are of much lower rental. One tenant who had to turn out of one of these cottages recently, for which she paid 3s.

a week, was obliged to move into one of the new ones, the only one available, the rent of which is 9s. 6d.

WISLEY.—I found no evidence that further accommodation was needed here for the inhabitants of the parish, although some of the old cottages may have to be replaced.

OCKHAM.—Four new cottages to replace old ones have recently been built, and several others need to be replaced or thoroughly renovated. Many instances came to my knowledge of men having to live at a distance, and of others requiring cottages. Rents are from 3s. to 6s.

EAST HORSLEY.—No cottage building has taken place in this parish for many years, and six cottages pulled down before the date of the last census have not been replaced.

WEST HORSLEY.—There has been land for sale in this parish, and some cottage building has taken place. A local builder is now putting up four pairs, which let readily at 5s. 6d. inclusive, but none of these contain three bedrooms. Several cottages in the village should be "condemned."

EAST CLANDON.—A block of four cottages was pulled down some years ago and not replaced. A local landowner is now building a pair of cottages for the temporary accommodation of tenants of old cottages, whilst these are being repaired. My recent inspection revealed a very unsatisfactory state of things in this village, both as to the condition of many of the cottages, and also in respect of overcrowding. There is special need here for further cottages in addition to the repair or reconstruction of those existing.

WEST CLANDON.—Practically no cottage building has taken place here for many years. I found four old cottages in a very bad state of repair, in one of which, with two bedrooms, live a father and mother and ten children.

SHERE.—A fair amount of cottage building has taken place in different parts of this large parish, but there continues to be a great scarcity in all parts, perhaps more especially at Gomshall. The best value for the rent charged, viz., 4/6 a week inclusive, I considered to be two pairs of cottages at the Hoe, Peaslake, which I have previously mentioned. Each contains a good-sized living room, and scullery, and three bedrooms. The position is excellent, and the land cost £200 per acre, or £25 per cottage. Three pairs of superior cottages or small villas are now being built at Shere. Men working at Shere and Gomshall are applying for cottages at Peaslake over two miles away.

ALBURY.—Very little building has been going on in this parish, and five cottages have been closed within about the last two years. A pair of cottages have recently been built at Newland's Corner of concrete blocks at a cost of £150 per cottage. Two men working at Albury Heath have to walk from Shalford daily, a distance of at least four miles. A farmer's son, who is married, has to walk at least two miles daily to the farm. A block of three cottages belonging to another farm are very old, and in an insanitary condition.

In conclusion, I trust the Council will see its way not only to take this question into its serious consideration, but also to act in the direction indicated, and so contribute materially to the health of the working classes in the district.

I am, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Your obedient Servant,

R. W. C. PIERCE.

Guildford,
July 28th, 1910.